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STATISTICAL ACCOUNT
OF THE
PARISH OF KILRONAN,
IN IRELAND,
AND OF THE NEIGHBOURING DISTRICT.



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Introduction.

I request that the reader would have the goodness to excuse my inserting the following account of a parish in Ireland; but I am led to do it, out of respect to the memory of a very public-spirited individual, the late Right Hon. William Burton Conyngham, who transmitted it to me, as the only account worth preserving, received by the Dublin Society, when they circulated their queries, regarding the state of Ireland, in 1773: And indeed I think that this paper, in some degree, explains the circumstances which have contributed to the rebellion which has lately raged in that kingdom, and which, I trust, is now fortunately extinguished. It must satisfy every thinking individual, at the same time, that, by attention on the part of the Irish government, by the introduction of industry and knowledge among a people so highly favoured by nature, and by promoting, through the medium of judicious political investigations, useful public institutions, and wise laws, the prosperity of the country, that the seeds of rebellion may be eradicated.

IN compliance with the Society's request of last June, (1773,) I have employed some time in examining, as far as in me lay, the present condition of the parish of Kilronan, in the county of Roscommon, and the adjoining * district; being employed there this summer, in the improvement of a tract thereof, which I have taken to farm last year.

1st query. The face of the arable part of this parish is hilly; the intervening vallies, in some parts a very rich soil, in others, turbary. The soil of the hills lying south of Bra-lieve mountain, having mostly a sole of limestone rock, and a surface of kind earth, produces sweet herbage and good crops of oats, though the tillage is indifferent.

The hills eastward of Cross-Hill, and extending from the river Feorus, to the stream dividing the counties of Leitrim and Roscommon, are composed, in general, of a brittle, friable, brownish earth, on the surface. As they approach the river Shannon, and the lake, they have a bottom, in some parts, of good manuring limestone gravel. As they ascend up the sides of the mountains, the soil of the surface remains the same colour and quality, about 16 inches deep, and the bottom a rotten slate, through which the water filtrates immediately, and by which the soil up the mountain remains remarkably dry, producing a short and sapless grass, but neither coarse nor spiry.

The parish of Kilronan is bounded on the east by the Shannon and Lough Allen; on the north, by the stream dividing the counties of Leitrim and Roscommon; and mostly on the south and west by the river Feorus.

2d query.

* When I mention the word district, I mean the whole country surrounding the lake.

2d query. Lough Allen is everywhere deep and navigable, about 9 miles long, and the Shannon is intended to be made navigable thereto; though the works at Jamestown, about 7 miles distant, seem to be this season suspended. There are two other rivers, the Feorus and the Argnach; neither of which are navigable, but both apt to swell suddenly with mountain floods, by which they enrich their banks, but the latter remarkably so. * They, as well as the lake and the Shannon, are immensely stored with pike, eel, trout, perch, &c. which may be taken in every season of the year, except the winter months; but never, so far as I can find, employed as a fund of industry by the neighbouring inhabitants, nor sent to any market for sale. The river Argnach, I think, merits a particular description, being in many respects a natural curiosity.

It rises in the glyn which divides Braliave from Sheve Corkrah, and taking a straight line from its source, to its entrance into the Shannon at Balytra Bridge, is about 7 miles long; but if taken by its meandrings, would measure double the length; however, in all its serpentine course, it does not deviate more than half a mile from a straight line drawn from its source to its end. No river in this kingdom swells so suddenly after a fall of rain, the torrent being irresistible, and carrying along an immense quantity of fine earth, sand, mountain sludge, &c. In the first 4 miles of its course, through the glyn which divides the two mountains, it has many rapid falls through the rocks, and runs in a line rather straighter than when it entirely quits the mountains at Argnach Bridge; after it passes this bridge, it meanders through a valley for near 3 miles, rendered, by its overflowings, almost

* Answers the 4th query.

most as flat as a water-level, and mightily enriched by its depositing there much of its fine earth and sediment.

Time, however, and some small banks raised against its overflowings by the country people, about 30 years ago, has caused a change in the river in this valley; it widened and deepened its bed, by which it does not now overflow its banks perhaps once a year. By this change, the banks are become from 12 to 14 feet higher than the bed of the river at low water, and produce excellent oats and potatoes, the only corn or roots ever cultivated here; and whether from the richness of the soil, or from the sun's being reflected with more violence from the sides of the mountains in this valley and district, oats ripen here near 3 weeks sooner, than in any part of the neighbouring counties.

From the accounts I have had of the soil producing the fine ombro madder in Holland, there is no spot in this kingdom better adapted to the culture of that root, than the banks of this river.

3d query. There is one mill on this river, well situated by having no land lost by its water course; it is kept in bad repair, and is chiefly used for the purpose of grinding oat-malt for distilling spirits. There is another mill at Ballyfarnon, at the south west extremity of the parish, used much for the same purpose; and the proprietor of this last, erected last season a mill for the purpose of scutching flax; but it must remain until the inhabitants of the district learn to cultivate the same, or else get business from the county of Sligo side.

5th & 7th queries. There is but one market town in the parish, viz. Ballyfarnon; it formerly had a good iron-foundry, and mills, which are now disused for want of charcoal; the weekly market is also disused, there being no trade stirring, but 4 annual fairs are held for the sale of cattle. The
village

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village consists at present of about 10 cabbins; the inhabitants of which subsist by dram selling.

In the district are two other market towns, viz. Drimkeerin and Drimshanbo; a weekly market, however, is only held at Drimshanbo on Fridays, which I have sometimes attended, and saw no traffic whatever carried on, and seemed intended only for an assemblage of people for the purpose of whisky drinking.

The roads through the parish and district and the bridges, have been the work of the last 14 years. Before then, this district was the most impenetrable part of the kingdom; but is at present a most convenient passage from the county of Sligo to the counties of Leitrim, Cavan, &c. also from the county of Roscommon, to Enniskillen, and the north.

6th query. Manufactures of any kind, never yet gained admittance into the parish of Kilronan, or neighbouring district, (the making of iron, now dropped, alone excepted.) The only method used by the inhabitants for paying their rents, which are lower here than in any part of the kingdom I know of, is by the sale of the increase of their cattle and pigs. * There are also about 250 horses fed here, which are employed in the carriage of coals and culm from Mr Jones's coalliery, all over the adjacent country. Their method of conveyance, is, by back loads, in small baskets, half a barrel in each; their price about 12s. per ton, for every 10 miles. They cannot be persuaded to the use of wheel cars, though one car would carry two barrels, and the work of 4 horses would consequently be performed by one.

The women are entirely idle, and have no manner of employment. They will not attempt the raising of flax, for
which

* Answers part of the 5th query.

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which they will give no reason, but that none of their ancestors attempted it, and consequently that their lands are unfit for it; but I have this season shewn them the contrary, having, for experiment, sown one peck of seed on the banks of the Argnach, and another on the top of one of the driest hills, in a small plot manured last season with lime, and both grew well;—the former best adapted for making fine, the latter coarse yarn.

I think this a proper place, to give an account of another species of employment, in which the inhabitants of this parish and adjacent district, spend much of their time, namely, that of distilling. As every cottager, to a man, distils his oats into spirits, every cabbin becomes alternately a whisky house, until the produce is drank. The neighbours making it a point to help out the consumption of their friends produce, he, in turn, pays his compliment in the same way; and a rotation of idleness and drinking is the consequence. The women also, being rather idler than the men, seem very great promoters of this traffic. I have had 12 stills reckoned to me in this parish and district.

8th query. In parts of the parish, adjacent to Balfarnon, they have, many years ago, used limestone gravel with success. In the parts eastward, and north of Cross Hill, they have never used any manures for the improvement of their lands, except dung. I have asked them the reason, and they told me that their soil never produced marl, limestone, or limestone gravel; that they never were used to improve, and if they had, the consequence would be, their being turned out of their farms, when meliorated. I have this summer shewn them their mistake in their two first reasons, by producing, from every hill I tried, good limestone, and limestone gravel. I have turned out some of the latter on the land, and have burned the former into good manuring lime; but

but the people seem rather displeased with the discovery, their latter reason overbalancing every other. In proof of this observation, Thomas Tennison, Esq. who has a large estate in this district, has, within the last 2 years, erected 3 very fine kilns for burning lime, for the use of his tenants, as well as his own, and has manured many fields in his possession with lime; the effect was admirable, and yet I think his tenants profit little by his example.

The district running east of the lake from Drimshanbo to Doobally is totally neglected. The face of the country is the same it was 200 years ago, except that the woods have been consumed by Drimshanbo foundery.

The parts west of the lake, as also the part lying north, between it and Doobally mountain, have been much improved within the last 10 years. Henry Seely, Esq. has built an elegant farm house near Drimkeerin, drained many swamps, and made several fine ditches. The Rev. Mr Crawford has built a good house, and is introducing the cabbage husbandry. And, Mr M'Parlan, the parish priest, is an encourager of industry, by his example, as well as advice, having limed and divided many waste fields.

9th, 10th, 11th & 12th queries. The produce of the land consists of nothing but oats and potatoes; and no other root or corn has been ever attempted, until this last season, that Mr Tennison's limed ground has produced very fine barley. Potatoes rate, in general, at 6d. per cwt. but this year at 5d. The corn is all distilled into spirits. Many horned cattle are bred in the vallies, and reared on the mountains, but the breed is bad. No sheep are bred here; though I am certain, if the dry grounds lying between the mountains and lake were fanded or limed, they would afford an excellent sweet pasture for these useful animals.

13th & 14th queries. I have already said that the women

are totally unemployed in this parish and district. The parish contains 370 families, which, including men, women, grown boys and girls, may be calculated at 4 to a family, which makes at present 1480 hands, who only barely procure themselves a subsistence, and are utterly useless to the public. The whole district is equally well inhabited, and equally idle, except about Drimkeerin.

15th query. I hear of only 2 families emigrated to America last season, and never any before; but by the eager enquiries of the people about their success, I imagine, the spirit of emigration might quickly seize them.

16th query. Perhaps this kingdom could not furnish another district, which could afford so much satisfaction, in respect to your 16th query, as this; to which, however, from my want of skill in many of these matters, I am disqualified to afford you the satisfaction I could wish. However, I can inform you, that throughout the whole district, a vein of very fine coal shews itself; but none is worked at present, except Mr Jones's, and that so badly, that if any water, be it ever so little, comes on the workmen, they are obliged to desist, not having even a common pump to rid themselves of any part.

The variety of strong sulphur spas, &c. scattered through the district, perhaps indicate a variety of minerals, which I want skill to ascertain; and no place in this kingdom, affords so great quantity of iron ore; nor is there perhaps a place in Europe where iron could be made to more advantage, if the method of running the same, with pit-coal, instead of charcoal, could be thoroughly practised.

Here also is the greatest variety of fine potters earth, and inexhaustible quarries of flint lie at the distance of 5 miles from Ballytra Bridge. This has made me often think, with what superior advantage a pottery might be established here,
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in preference to any place in Staffordshire; the price of land, the * price of labour, the cheapness of provisions, plenty of fish, quantity and cheapness of fuel, are all in favour of this place. Add to this, the benefit of water carriage, like to be soon so universal from this place, by means of the Shannon and Grand Canal. At Durslem, where they manufacture the queen's ware, they carry flint by land 60 miles, and lye near 60 miles from any sea-port. Here, an easy water carriage is likely soon to be effected, to almost every principal port in the kingdom.

The navigation could be easily extended to the west coast, The north-west part of Lough Allen is distant from Lough Gilly, which extends to Sligo, about 7 miles; and the level of the two waters, taken with exactness, is about 8 feet, neither high hills nor deep vallies intervening.

The size of the farms, I take it, would be also favourable to population and manufactures.—The rising grounds, as intersected by the vallies, run from 40 to 80 acres. The proportion of bog and mountain to arable and meadow, exceeds one half, and I take the whole district, on improvement, would turn out from 12 to 13,000 acres.

These are such answers as I can give at present to your queries, which I have made as short as possible, the less to encroach on your time: But I imagined you would not think this district the more unworthy your notice, for being hitherto the most neglected and uncultivated in the kingdom, though perhaps, from its many natural advantages, the most capable of being improved to public and national utility.

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* Land, 9s. per acre; labour, 5d. per day; coal, 8s. per ton at the pit. Answers 17th query.

If the Society should think any further information necessary from this quarter, their queries shall be answered with all the exactness in the power of

Their very humble servant,

Ballytra, near Carrick, }
Aug. 25th, 1773. }

CHA^s. O'CONNOR.

Observations on the preceding paper.

What a field for improvement does not this account exhibit? and, how unfortunate is it, that similar returns had not been made from every other part of Ireland? It might have laid such a foundation for the prosperity of that kingdom, and furnished such means of occupation to its inhabitants, that they would have had other things to think of than rebellion, and would have turned with disgust from those treasonable practices in which they have lately been involved. But if any large proportion of Ireland resembled this district, what else could be expected from a mass of people, ignorant, idle, addicted to intoxicating liquors, and without any profitable means of employment?

Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, }
3d July, 1798. }

